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# The PLO's Burgeoning Islamic Fervor

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AMMAN, JORDAN

It is time for the noon prayers and the office of the Palestine National Council in Amman suddenly starts emptying. In the corridors, people are hurrying by, completing their absolution before bowing to Allah.

For years the council, the Palestinian parliament in exile, and its parent body, the Palestine Liberation Organization, have projected themselves as secular. After all, more than 20% of their members are either Christian or simply atheists. But this is changing. Palestinians are turning to Islam and the PLO is becoming Islamized from the bottom up.

Despite the Muslim majority, most Palestinians in the past had resigned themselves to the thinking of Yasser Arafat, their leader, that only a political and diplomatic solution, supported by the United States and the West, would get them their homeland. Hence, the need to be secular.

Now, rank-and-file Palestinians say this was a myth that has been shattered. Twenty-one years after the PLO was formed, they are no closer to a homeland. And almost 52% of the West Bank and Gaza, occupied by Israel during the 1967 War and marked out by President Reagan as the logical homeland, has now fallen either to Jewish settlers or annexation.

Privately, a majority of the more than two dozen rank-and-file members interviewed indicated that the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran has affected their thinking. They observed that actions—

such as the suicide bombing of the U.S. Marine base in Lebanon, killing 241 soldiers, and the bombing of U.S. embassies by Islamic fundamentalists—speak louder than words. Some will tell you very bluntly that their sympathies now lie with Islam.

And Iran is very cognizant of this. One can notice it in Iranian propaganda beamed at the Arab world. Consider the case of Suleiman Khater, the Egyptian soldier who went berserk and killed five Israeli tourists last October, in revenge for the Israeli bombing of the PLO headquarters in Tunis. He has been declared a hero by Iran—a street has been named after him and a special day set aside in his honor.

"Which other Arab government gave him this honor?" asked a PLO member in an interview. "Hosni Mubarak instead took Mossad's help and hung him in jail and then called it suicide. Did you hear about the riots in his village? The money raised for his family in Kuwait?"

A top-level Palestine National Council bureaucrat in charge of foreign affairs said: "The leaders can come to any solution they want about a ministate in consideration with Jordan. The real war

will be won when the Islamic people rule all of Palestine [Israel] with Al-Qods [Jerusalem] as the undivided capital."

"We tried everything," quipped a PLO major over a cup of Turkish coffee in Amman. "The only thing we did not try was Islam. My people are trying it now. I can sense it."

A Western diplomat, a long-time PLO observer in Amman, said the most ominous thing about this rebirth of Islam is that there is no Islamic organization springing up within the PLO to challenge

its leadership. This makes it more difficult—for intelligence purposes—to analyze than a structured revolt.

Islamization is an attitude that stems from despair in the refugee camps, the breeding ground for potential terrorists, including the Muslim Brotherhood, which is known to operate in Egypt, Syria and Jordan, and to have infiltrated the Egyptian army.

The only one who openly goes on the record about this change in attitude is Khalida Hammami, chief of the English-language service of WAFA, the PLO's news agency. Hammami's husband, a moderate and the first Palestinian to open a private dialogue with Israel, was gunned down in London in the early 1970s by the Abu Nidal renegade PLO faction.

"Islam is changing the Palestinian movement from inside, giving us a new sense of direction," she said.

The leadership is equally cognizant of this. As early as 1981, Shafik Hout, the PLO ambassador to Beirut, told me that Islam was the single biggest threat to a secular PLO.

Earlier this year, PLO Chairman Arafat, during a five-hour interview, acknowledged that Islamic fundamentalism forms a large and growing part of the "typhoon of terrorism" sweeping the Middle East. He looked visibly upset when questioned about the changing face of the PLO and insisted that the organization will remain secular.

But the writing is definitely on the wall, and this time it goes from right to left, in Arabic script, and reads "Allah o Akbar," God is Great, the new battle cry. The Western diplomat observed that the Jewish Masada complex (Masada was the stronghold where the Jewish Zealots made a last stand against the Romans in

AD 72-73, a symbol of freedom and resistance) is now being matched by the jihad complex, meaning the Islamic holy war.

For Islam brings with it the concept of martyrdom, of assassinations and suicide bombings, not aimed simply at the so-called "Zionist enemy" but at anyone else perceived as supporting this enemy. Without any hesitation, the rank-and-file members interviewed named the United States as the main supporter of their enemy.

Another guerrilla said, "We now realize that the fight is not just between us and Zionists, but between us and the Christian-Zionist conspiracy."

There is a clear sense of hopelessness among these people, almost 1.2 million in Jordan alone. Their talk begins with the Christian crusades and ends with their assertions that the Christian West is paying for its feelings of guilt over the Nazi Holocaust by ceding Palestine to Israel.

Nobody is more cognizant of this born-again threat than the Central Intelligence Agency, according to officials in Canada and in Washington. A multimillion-dollar agency program is now under way to compile a massive profile of Islam—political, sociological and historical. Last December, the director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University, Prof. Nadav Safran, was forced to relinquish his post for not disclosing that the CIA had given him \$107,000 for a book on Saudi security and more than \$45,000 to conduct an international seminar on Islam and politics in the Mideast. (Safran remained a Harvard professor, however.)

Equally cognizant of the CIA interest is the PLO. Hammami of WAFA said, "Our worry is that the Americans will now use Islam to divide the PLO." She and others talk of an attempt by pro-Western Arabs to emphasize the schism in Islam, the fact that Iranians are Shias, who form about 10% of Muslims, that martyrdom is a Shia concept and that Arabs are Sunnis and the majority.

"Sure, they [the Iranians] are different. They are not Arabs and they pray differently," said the PLO bureaucrat. "But they pray to Allah, period. This will be an Islamic war." □

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